

By Michael Hanlon

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POLARPAM

# Here is a peak that soars two miles above the Yukon

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HANLON

**The idea was to plant the flag of Saskatchewan right on the icy top of this uninviting mass of rocks and snow, but the climbers were forced back when only 900 feet from the summit. The ascent took two weeks.**

IT WAS ENOUGH to make a mountain goat blush. There, 8,200 feet up in the St. Elias Range in the Yukon, one of the most hazardous climbing areas in the world, was this line of ladies' underwear, flapping noisily as it dried in the mountain air. It belonged to the occupants of a nearby tent—two women from British Columbia and two from Quebec—who were trying to figure out a way to climb 3,187 feet higher to the top of this particular mountain, named Mount Saskatchewan, to plant Saskatchewan's flag atop the summit.

They never did make it, partly because rain forced them to shelter in their tent for several days, partly because the rock conditions were bad—either too hard to drive a spike into or too crumbly to enable them to get a good hand- or foothold—and partly because the mountain was a lot tougher than any of them had expected. They did get to within 900 feet of the top on one of their three assaults on the summit, but a narrow ridge of loose rock forced them to turn back.

Much of their two weeks on the mountain was spent waiting for the weather to clear. So what do four women do when they're huddled together for hours in a tent on the side of a mountain? They talk, mostly. They also shampoo their hair, labor manfully to get dirt out of their fingernails, sleep a lot, wash their underwear, take stand-up baths and listen to avalanches (54 in four hours).

"We were a very lively group and we had a lot of laughs," said Gertrude Smith, the Vancouver schoolteacher who was the leader of the team, one of 14 teams climbing in the St. Elias Range this summer as part of the Yukon Alpine Centennial Expedition. "We had plenty of time to get to know each other and we found we were a very compatible group."

Miss Smith and Mrs. Helen Butling, a physiotherapist from Nelson, B.C., had climbed together before but neither had met the other women on the team, Andrea Rankin and Mrs. Wendy Teich-



mann, both from Montreal, until their planes landed at Fort St. John, B.C., on the way to Whitehorse.

"I think perhaps the fact that we didn't know each other might have helped," said Mrs. Butling. "It gave us more to talk about, to find out about each other."

"We'd talk and laugh about anything," Gertrude Smith said. "The things we laughed about were usually silly things, like the fact that we'd worry about having dirty nails and shampooing our hair [Wendy Teichmann brought the dry shampoo]. We also talked about the 16 men who shared our base camp. And we would take it in turns to read to each other [one book they had on the trip: D. M. Le Bourdais' Stefansson, Ambassador Of The North]. And we would sleep. I can't remember when I've slept so much."

Still, they were there to climb, and whenever the weather lifted, they roped themselves together, grabbed their axes and made their way up the mountain. The first thing they had to do when they arrived at their base camp, which they shared with four other climbing teams, was to find their mountain. "There's nothing but mountains and glaciers in there," Gertrude Smith said. "We didn't want to find ourselves climbing somebody else's."

On their first day of reconnaissance it rained so hard they had to return to their tent and wait for clear weather so they could dry their clothes. The next day they probed as high as 10,200 feet, then found they were on a route that could not take them to the top.

Even when the weather was good, climbing conditions were tough. "That's a big, big mountain," team leader Smith said. "I don't think anyone realized how tough it was going to be. The rock was bad in a lot of places. I think it would have been easier if the climb had been made earlier in the year. The weather wasn't really all that depressing—on the nice days it was quite pleasant. But I'm afraid we didn't have enough of them to finish what we set out to do. And it wasn't really so very cold."

"It must have been freezing," Helen Butling said, "because the rivulets were frozen over in the morning. We had to remember to fill our pots the night before." She agreed with Gertrude Smith's comment that "it's such dangerous country you have to take every precau-



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# And here are the four intrepid mountaineers who tamed it (well, almost)



Paddy Sherman

"We had a lot of laughs," says the leader of the team, Gertrude Smith, who's doing the cooking. The others who challenged Mount Saskatchewan are, from left, Wendy Teichmann, Andrea Rankin and Helen Butling.

tion you can think of."

"Every move you make is hairy," Mrs. Butling said. "It's so steep and there are so many crevasses. And we found that, as four women climbing together, we had been so used to following the men in the past that we were extra careful."

She also encountered what might be termed Missing Person Anguish. "I kept getting this sensation that there was a fifth person with us. After we had bivouacked one night and were

getting our stuff together I was thinking, where's the fifth person? Why doesn't someone help her get ready? The odd thing was that this other girl, Wendy Teichmann, experienced the same thing. It's never happened to me before but I have read about it happening to climbers at high altitudes."

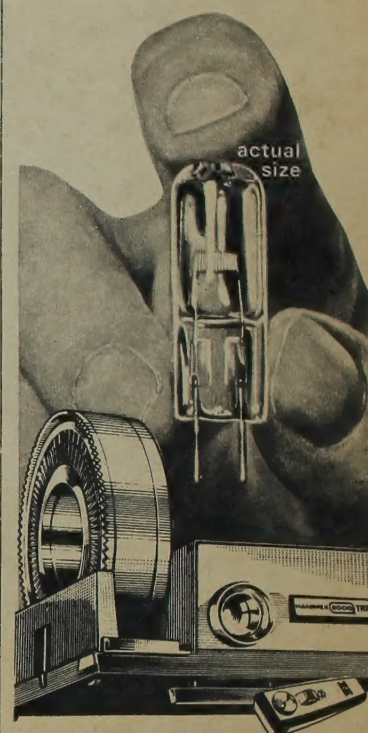
Gertrude Smith and Helen Butling came down from the mountains after two weeks, leaving Wendy Teichmann and Andrea Rankin to join a team tackling another mountain. Then they did the two things that all climbers, men included, had dreamed about: having a good wash and a cold beer (though the women had the wash first). They had a leisurely dinner and, while the male climbers continued drinking and singing songs that, even for the Yukon, might be considered risqué, Miss Smith

and Mrs. Butling took showers and sorted out their equipment for the final journey home.

But before she left the Yukon, Helen Butling hinted at the reason four women would spend two weeks trying to climb one mountain. "It may seem an odd thing to say, but it's so restful. It's like going back to babyhood—where time doesn't matter, or only insofar as it takes you a certain time to do something. For instance, we set out from our camp at seven o'clock one evening and climbed until 2 a.m. We didn't have to worry about time passing or about it getting dark because we had the midnight sun. Time didn't matter."

"That's why it's such a wonderful holiday: because although you work damned hard you get plenty of rest. And, boy, did I ever sleep."

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of water. Combine and heat to boiling, stirring frequently. Serves four.

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